

The colophon of MS 5007
by A. R. George

(fig. 00, copy A. R. George)

This elaborate colophon reports the dedication of a young scribe's work to Nabû and its deposition in a container (*gunnu*) at the entrance to E-babbarra, the temple of Šamaš. It joins a well-populated corpus of similar colophons on the reverse of school tablets, many of which are also framed with rows of cuneiform wedges (in general, see Gesche 2000: 153–66). According to archaeological provenance and internal evidence, the tablets on which colophons of this type appear come from at least three different Babylonian cities:

From Babylon (temples of Nabû):

(a) tablets in the Iraq Museum: Cavigneaux 1981a: 37–77

(b) tablet in the Vorderasiatisches Museum: Maul 1998: viii–xvii

(c) tablets in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Gesche 2000: 648–60; 2005

(d) two solid barrel cylinders in the British Museum: Lambert 1978: 98–103 and 110–11; Gesche 2000: 161–4

From Borsippa (temple of Nabû):

(e) tablet in the Hoffman Collection, New York: Snell 1994; Frahm 1995; Gesche 1995; Cavigneaux 1996

From Borsippa or a nearby place (temple of Mār-bīti):

(f) tablet in the British Museum: Gesche 2000: 625–26

From Sippar (temple of Šamaš, where stated):

(g) tablets in the British Museum (Abu Habbah collections): e.g. Gesche 2000: 164, 463–64 BM 60188 rev.; 470–72 BM 63653 rev. ii'; 474–77 BM 64479+ v; 481–82 BM 64483+ vi'; 483 BM 64495 rev.; 508–9 BM 66471 rev.; 569–70 BM 70053 rev.; 602–3 BM 72827 rev.; BM 72890.

Because the colophons of some of the tablets cited under (g) refer explicitly to their deposition in “E-babbarra, the temple of Šamaš at Sippar”, the E-babbarra of the present tablet is no doubt also the great sanctuary of Sippar rather than the temple of the same name in Larsa. The city of Sippar (now Abu Habbah) is thus the tablet's likely provenance. As is well known, cuneiform tablets are so far absent from the archaeological and epigraphic record at Sippar after the reign of Xerxes (485–465 BC), so the colophon suggests that MS 5007 was written no later than the early fifth century.

The tablet is marred on both sides by erasures, poor writing skills and demonstrable errors, and is noteworthy for the prominence of unconventional spellings at word-boundaries (ll. 4: en-ú-a-na-ku for *bēlū'a anāku* with crasis; 6: *lib-bi-šú-ia-na* for *libbīšu ana*; 7: *iš-tu-ak-kul-lat* for *ištu kullati*; 8: *ad-dī-i-áz-bil* for *addīma azbil* with crasis). It was clearly the work of an inexperienced novice.

Text

1 a-na^d nabû(nà) apli(ibila) šīri(mah!) šit-ra-ḥu ra-šub-ba bu-kúr {aš}

- 2 ^dasar-re reš-tu-ú a-šá-red maḥ-ri na-ši
3 tuppi(im.dub) šīmāt(nam)^{meš} ilī(dingir)^{meš} šá ina nap-ḥar kiš-šat ú-taq-qu-ú
4 ilī(dingir)^{meš} d^d t-gì-gì bēl(en)-ú-a-na-ku^{md} šamaš(utu)-rīhtu(tag₄!)-uṣur(pap) māri(a) šá
5 ^{md}šamaš(utu)-iddina(mu)^{lú} nuḥatimmu(muḥaldim) {ras.} šá ^dšamaš(utu) u^d a-a ina
ḥu-du
6 lib-bi-šú-ia-na šēri(edin) ú-šu dš-šá-am-ma tīdu(im) el-
7 lu iš-tu-ak-kul-lat qa-diš-tum ú-bil-lam-ma
8 a-na kišādi(gú)-iá ad-dī!(PI)-i-áz-bil a-na balāṭ(tin)
9 napišti(zi)-iá a-na arāk(gíd.da) {meš} ūmīl(ud)^{meš} ana tu-ub lib-bi
10 ana tu-ub libbi(šā) bīt(é) abi(ad)-iá kun-nu iš[di(suḥuš)-i]a šullum!
11 zēri(numun)-iá tuppu(im.dub) liš-tur lu-še-rib a-na! gunni(gú.un!)
12 'a-(na) ka-nik?'¹ dal-tum é.babbar.ra tuppu(im.dub) ina erēbi(ku₄)-k[a]
13 [x x x] 'x x šá ^{md}šamaš(utu)-rīhtu(tag₄!)-uṣur(pap) māri(a)¹ [šá ^{md}šamaš(utu)-
iddina(mu) . . . (remainder lost)]

For Nabû, august, majestic and awesome heir, firstborn son of Asarre, foremost of all, who bears the tablet of destinies of the gods, whom the Igigi gods respect most in the entire universe, my lord, I, Šamaš-rīhtu-uṣur, son of ⁵ Šamaš-iddina, the baker of Šamaš and Aya, with joy in my heart went out to the open countryside. I picked up some clean clay and brought it from the holy clay-deposit. I loaded(!) it on my shoulder and transported it. For my good health, for a long life, for well-being, ¹⁰ for the well-being of my father's household, my own stability and my successful raising(!) of a family, I(!) wrote (this) tablet. I(!) sent it in to the *gunnu*-container, to the porter of the door of E-babbarra. O tablet, when you enter, [intercede(?)] for Šamaš-rīhtu-uṣur, son [of Šamaš-iddina! . . .]

Notes

4. The writer's name evidently belongs to the well-known pattern DN-x-uṣur. In this case the x is the sign KAB, but that yields no sense in the context and, assuming that the boy could write his own name correctly, another decipherment must be sought. C. B. F. Walker kindly reminds me that Late Babylonian KÍD = *dad* sometimes resembles KAB. Fossey booked just such a form of KÍD as no. 4316 in his *Manuel d'Assyriologie* (Fossey 1926: 134). Although it must be noted that Fossey's no. 4316 is an isolated example cited from a very Late Babylonian context (*SBH*), in the company of many instances of dissimilar forms, it speaks for the possibility of ancient confusion of the signs KAB and KÍD and leads to a solution in the present case. The sign KÍD has the Sumerian value tag₄ "to leave over" = Akkadian *rāḥu* "to be left behind". Here it is used as a logogram, instead of the usual íb.tag₄, for *rīhtu* "remnant, survivor". The name Šamaš-rīhtu-uṣur thus means "O Šamaš, protect (my) surviving child!" No person of this name occurs in the extant archives of the E-babbarra temple, but the comparable name Nabû-rīhtu-uṣur was current there in the sixth century (Bongenaar 1997: 414 sub Nabû-rēḫet-uṣur), as well as elsewhere.

7. The sign *ak* is perhaps the legacy of an abandoned attempt at writing *akrišamma* “I removed a chunk”, which is the key verb describing the acquisition of the clay in other colophons (see the commentary below). There it is preceded by *īdu ištu ašri elli*, but in the present colophon *īdu elli* is the object of a different verb, *aššamma*.

8. The signs *ad pi i* are hardly for *aṭpi < ṭepū* “to attach”, a technical term unsuited to the context. For *nadū* used to convey the laying of items on the neck and shoulders (*tikku, kišādu*), see the examples quoted by CAD N/1: 82 sub *nadū* 2.4', 2.9' and 2.13'.

10. At the end *šul-lum* is expected from the parallel passages. What is written resembles ŠÚ+SAG, but is probably a miswritten *šul*.

11. The precative forms *lištur* and *lušērib* (for *lišērib*) occur where other colophons of this type employ indicatives. The precatives can be explained as contaminated by material from the missing latter part of the colophon, which probably included phrases of prayer to Nabû for the continuation of the scribal dynasty. Such a prayer concludes two of the colophons from Babylon (Gesche 2005: 259 rev. 13'–14'; cf. 264 rev. 12'): *māru(dumu) šá ki-ma ia!-a-tú ṭuppa(im.dub)-šú [liš-tur-ma] li-še-rib bīt(é)-tuk-ku* “let (my) son, like me, [write] his tablet and send it into your house”.

11–12. *gunnu* and *kānik* (var. *ka-nak*) *bābi* are technical terms in Late Babylonian colophons (for a full discussion see Cavigneaux 1981b: 123–24; 1999: 389–90). Here *daltu* “door” is an understandable mistake for *bābu* “gate”.

13. Parallel passages lead us to expect *šabat abbūtu u qibi damiqtu* “intercede for and speak well of” at the beginning of the line. I cannot reconcile the visible traces with either expression.

Commentary

The prosopography of the archives of the Sippar temple has been explored by Herman Bongenaar (1997). I have not been able to find Šamaš-rīhtu-ušur, the writer of MS 5007, among the known personnel of E-babbarra, but his father, Šamaš-iddina “baker of Šamaš and Aya”, can plausibly be identified with Šamaš-iddina of the Dannēa family. This individual is attested as a prebendary baker of Šamaš from the third year of Cambyses (527 BC) to the reign of Darius (Bongenaar 1997: 197). He was probably followed in that office by a son, the scribe Šuma-iddina, who is attested from Darius' seventeenth to thirty-fifth years, 505–487 BC (Bongenaar 1997: 184–86). The absence of an additional son, Šamaš-rīhtu-ušur, from the copious archives of Šamaš's temple might be explained by his youth. Supposing he was a child of Šamaš-iddina's old age and still a scribal apprentice at the time of the Babylonian uprisings of 484 BC, then he would not figure in the extant documentation for two reasons (leaving aside premature death or disablement): (a) the archives of E-babbarra terminate in that year (Bongenaar 1997: 4), and (b) his family would certainly have lost position and wealth when Xerxes subsequently replaced the old urban elites with new, more loyal men (Waerzeggers 2003–4: 156–63).

In its invocation to Nabû (ll. 1–4) and request for favor and blessings on the scribe and his family (ll. 8–13) the colophon of MS 5007 is unremarkable. However, its statement of the source of the tablet's clay is new and important (ll. 5–8). Other

examples of this type of colophon have the following to say about where the clay came from:

(a) VAT 17035 rev. 14'–15', ed. Maul 1998: x: *ṭi-id [u]l-tu*^{giš} *kiri(kiri₆) apsi(abzu)ⁱ ik-ri-iš-ma*

(b) EAH 197 rev. 15–16, ed. Frahm 1995, Gesche 1995: *ṭidu(im) ultu(ta) ki-di ašri(ki) elli(kù) ik-ri-iš-ša-am-ma ṭup-pi ištur(sar)-ma*

(c) BM 32620 rev. 12–13, ed. Gesche 2005: 262: *ṭidu(im) iš-tu ki-di a-ša[r] el-[lu i]k-ri-iš-ša-am-ma [ṭuppu] áš-tur-ma*

(d) BM 77665+ rev. 15–16, ed. Gesche 2000: 652: *[ṭi-i]d iš-tu ki-di áš-[ru] el-lu [ik]-ri-ša-am-ma ṭuppu(im.dub) iš-tur-ma*

(e) BM 68403: 17–18, copy Lambert 1978: 111, ed. Maul 1998: xii: *ṭidu(im) iš-tu ki-di a-šar e[l-lu ak]-ri-ša!-am-ma ṭuppu(im.dub) aš-tur-m[a]*

(f) MMA 86.11.362 rev. 7', ed. Gesche 2005: 259: *[ṭidu] iš-tu ki-di ašri(ki) elli(kù) ik-ri-ša-am ṭuppu(im.dub) i[š-tur-ma]*

Passage (a) refers to a specific location: “he removed a chunk of clay from the Garden of the Apsû”. A list of sacred gates shows that this was a sacred location at Babylon, on the east bank of the Euphrates next to the temple of Ea in the centre of Babylon (George 1992: 94–95 ll. 26–27; 398). Passages (b)–(f) are less specific, recording only that “He (or I) removed a chunk of clay from a pure location outside and wrote the tablet”. Maul argued that because *ašru ellu* is attested as a learned interpretation of the Sumerian name of Ea’s temple, E-kar-zaginna, so the “pure location” of these colophons was a reference to the “Garden of the Apsû” (Maul 1998: xiv).

The colophon of MS 5007 refers explicitly to an out-of-town location (l. 6: *ana šēri ūšī*), which suggests that *kīdu* “outside” in passages (b)–(f) denotes “out-of-town”, as often, and that the “pure location” whence the clay was taken was similarly outside the city walls. A further detail offered by MS 5007 is that the clay for the tablet was fetched from a specially identified deposit of clay (l. 7: *kullatu qadištu*). The term *kullatu* refers to water-laid clay in its natural state, as is made clear by the commentary *Murgud* on *Urra = ḫubullu* X 133: [im]-dù-a = *kul-la-tum* = *ṭīd(im) palgi(pa₅)* “canal clay”. The adjective *qadištu* implies that the deposit of clay was sacred, a status achieved by ritual purification, for the expression *kullata quddušu* “to purify a clay deposit” occurs in several Babylonian apotropaic rituals of the first millennium. Two such rituals, a universal *namburbi* (Maul 1994: 485–86 ll. 19–20) and the ritual that accompanied the production of apotropaic figurines (Wiggermann 1992: 12 ll. 145–50), clarify this practice: first, at sunrise, the exorcist consecrated the clay deposit with a censer, torch and holy water, then he placed in it a gift of gold, silver and precious stones, prostrated himself, arose and finally recited the incantation *én kullat kullat* “O clay deposit, clay deposit!” Two versions of this incantation survive, from Nineveh (Wiggermann 1992: 12 ll. 151–57) and Aššur (*KAR* 134 rev. 15–20). Another incantation addressed to the clay deposit is *LKA* 89 i 12'–19' // *KAR* 227 i 15–22, ed. Schwemer 2010.

On the basis of the previously known colophons others have commented on the probable ritual context of the presentation of students’ votive tablets to temples (Maul 1998: xvi; Cavigneaux 1999: 391; Gesche 2000: 157–58). Aided by the colophon of MS

5007, a still more detailed picture begins to emerge of an important day in the life of a Babylonian boy learning to write. At dawn he (and probably his peers) accompanied an exorcist (and probably his teacher, if the exorcist was not his teacher) to a special riverside location, usually outside town. There they witnessed the ritual consecration of a stratum of good, clean clay by words and deeds, and the offering to it of precious materials for which their families no doubt had to pay. If they listened carefully to the words of the incantation that accompanied the ritual, they would learn that these gifts were to propitiate the clay deposit and compensate it for its depletion.

Afterwards each boy dug up a hefty lump of the clay and lugged it back to town. Of this special clay he made a tablet, and wrote on its obverse selected excerpts of the texts he had been learning to demonstrate his mastery of them. On its reverse he wrote his own colophon, by making a personalized version of a more-or-less standard dedication addressed to Nabû, the patron deity of writing. This may have been his first attempt at free composition, as opposed to setting down text at dictation or copying from another tablet. Poor sign-forms, strange spellings and egregious errors reinforce such a view.

Petra Gesche found evidence to suggest that sometimes the colophon was written by another party, e.g. the teacher or a more advanced student (Gesche 2001: 155). No doubt some boys struggled on their own and obtained such help, but it was surely the intention that, as far as possible, they wrote their votive tablets with their own hand (Cavigneaux 1996: 26). The finished article was sometimes known as *ṭuppi mešherûti* “tablet of childhood”, probably a technical term that signified a beginner’s level of competence (Cavigneaux 1999: 388).

Having finished the tablet, for better or worse, and perhaps having signified its special status by framing the text with cuneiform wedges, the boy accompanied his master to the local temple, where – because too young to enter the sacred precincts – he deposited it in the porter’s box as a votive offering to Nabû. No doubt the events of the day formed a recognized rite of passage, and maybe they marked formally the boy’s completion of an initial stage of his education.

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